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## The Rise of Veganism in Post-Socialist Europe : Making Sense of Emergent Vegan Practices and Identities in Estonia

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## CHAPTER 9

### Estonia

# **The Rise of Veganism in Post-Socialist Europe: Making Sense of Emergent Vegan Practices and Identities in Estonia**

*Kadri Aavik*

Within the emerging field of vegan studies, veganism as a cultural practice and personal identity has been explored mainly in Western societies and cultures, such as the US (Wright). However, these observations on veganism are not necessarily representative of vegan identities and practices elsewhere in the world. Veganism as an emerging social and cultural phenomenon is likely to be empirically and conceptually different in other social, cultural, and political settings. This essay explores veganism as a nascent social and cultural practice in the post-socialist context via the example of Estonia, a small EU member state, which regained its independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Veganism has thus far received little scholarly attention in this region. The concept and practice began to arise and slowly enter mainstream consciousness in Estonia only since the mid-2000s. Yet particularly the last couple of years have witnessed “a vegan boom” in Estonia, with growing interest in veganism and the number of vegans rising, particularly among the younger generations.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, there has been a considerable increase in vegan food options, especially in bigger cities, and veganism is becoming increasingly visible in mainstream culture.

In this chapter, I unpack the politics and challenges of being vegan in contemporary Estonia—a setting where access to a vegan identity was impossible until very recently. I discuss three ways in which we could begin to study veganism in this context. My principal point is that veganism should be understood not only as a personal lifestyle choice, but also as a political practice. As such, I will argue that this duality is best understood in intersectional terms. Second, I consider veganism in Estonia vis-à-vis mainstream culture and point out some social and cultural norms that veganism disrupts. As a third and final issue, I briefly explore vegan consumption’s uneasy relationship with capitalism. This chapter will argue that studying these three dimensions relating to veganism will help to paint a more nuanced and intersectional picture of veganism, one that is situated within political practice enmeshed in power relations and structures. This analysis might be useful for vegans and scholars in Estonia and in other societies where veganism is an emergent phenomenon

(such as in the post-socialist countries) to reflect on the histories, current meanings, and future directions of veganism in these spaces.

Stemming from my own academic and personal situatedness as a feminist sociologist and vegan, I explore the issues introduced above through an intersectional and sociological feminist lens. In my approach to veganism, I also draw on insights from critical animal studies and ecofeminism, highlighting the interlinked nature of oppressions (see for example Glasser 53; Adams). I do not consider veganism as simply a dietary choice or lifestyle, but always a political project (Jenkins and Twine), enmeshed in various power relations, even if those who engage in it do not explicitly always see it as such. In my view, any sociological analysis should take into account this political dimension of veganism, as well as see vegan practices as situated in particular social and cultural contexts. This latter insight has implications for ways in which we conceptualize veganism and vegans. Beyond the common key commitment of abstaining from animal products, veganism is manifested differently and might mean different things to vegan individuals and communities located in various parts of the world. It might thus be more apt to speak of veganisms, to acknowledge this diversity on a global scale.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF THE ESTONIAN VEGAN MOVEMENT**

Insofar as definitions of social movements (see for example Diani) typically entail elements such as groups of actors building and sharing a collective identity, exchanging information through (informal) networks, and a shared focus on particular political or social issues with the aim of bringing about (or resisting) social change, collective vegan practices in Estonia today can certainly be understood as a social movement.

Curiously, the escalating emergence of veganism has not been preceded by a vegetarian movement, as is common in many Western societies where vegetarianism, with its more comfortable relationship to the mainstream, has paved the way and helped veganism to fight for public recognition, as Wright (32–36) has noted about American culture. Vegetarians, many of whose motivations are primarily related to health and not necessarily a clear agenda of animal justice, have not engaged in collective identity-building around their vegetarianism as mainly a dietary choice, as vegans have around veganism, which in Estonia arose out of concerns for animal lives. Even today, key vegan and animal advocacy activists work closely together, although division between those two areas is increasingly taking place.

In part, historical reasons account for the absence of a vegetarian movement and vegetarian identity in Estonia. The Soviet regime did not enable any independent social movements to emerge, including collective identity building and practices around food and consumption. When part of the Soviet Union, Estonia was cut off

from information from the West. Furthermore, food choices were limited and people only had access to basic foods in the Soviet Union.

The first decade post-independence in the early 1990s was characterized by major uncertainty, as the country was going through the transition to democracy. Many people were struggling to establish basic levels of material security, which made it difficult for any social movements to emerge that did not concern the immediate well-being of people. Since post-independence, processes of Westernization began to take place in Estonia and the country became increasingly connected to the global flows of capital and information. Internet began to spread in Estonia during the second half of 1990s, which greatly facilitated access to information previously inaccessible to Estonians. The first information on veganism in the Estonian language started to appear online only around the mid-2000s, translated from the English language by local vegans and vegan activists.<sup>2</sup> While inspiration and information on veganism were (and are often still) drawn from online English-language resources and communities, to say that veganism was simply a Western import unduly simplifies the narrative of how veganism developed in Estonia and underestimates the agency of Estonian vegans in selecting and engaging with particular ideas deemed relevant for the local context. This representation risks reproducing the colonial discourse of the “superiority” of Western knowledge and its gradual but inevitable spread to other (non-Western) parts of the world as part of a “modernizing” or “civilizing” mission. It is more accurate to conceptualize the emergence of veganism in Estonia as a complex interaction between particular information and ideas borrowed from elsewhere with local knowledge, historical circumstances, traditions, and social practices. This involves active and critical engagement with these ideas, rather than their passive reception.

Vegans in Estonia began to connect, socialize, and engage in activism through online channels in the mid-2000s. In 2012, the Estonian Vegan Society was established. It has been a purely voluntary organization but has recently started taking steps to fund-raise and create paid positions. The Vegan Society and its key activists have been instrumental in bringing together vegans and those interested in veganism, establishing and maintaining the Facebook groups where Estonian vegans interact. Everyday community building and “identity work” (Snow and Anderson) is still largely taking place online, with occasional offline meet-ups.<sup>3</sup> For Estonian vegans and particularly the Vegan Society, this online presence has had an amplifying effect—leaving the impression that the organization is bigger than the actual small core group of volunteers.

In 2018, we can speak of an increasingly active and visible vegan community, which is gradually diversifying. It includes more and more people whose motivations are not necessarily embedded in animal ethics, but stem, for example, from health and fitness considerations. Subgroups within the movement have begun to emerge in recent years, around nodes of interest such as vegan parenting, vegan fitness, etc. Also, members of the vegan community can

be differentiated according to their level of involvement—ranging from key activists for whom veganism and vegan activism forms a central part of their identity, to those more loosely associated with the movement. For example, a large proportion of participants in the popular Estonian Facebook group focused on food and food images titled “Yes, it’s vegan!,” including many non-vegans interested in vegan food. Hence, the boundaries of the Estonian vegan movement are rather blurry, and notions of a coherent community can be illusory.

## **VEGANISM AS MORE THAN IDENTITY: STRUCTURAL AND INTERSECTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It has become a tendency in much of contemporary sociological research to focus on identities and lifestyles. Studying identity, often conceptualized as a personal project linked to individual lifestyle choices, gives consideration to individual agency but does not often pay sufficient attention to structural limitations that individuals face. This approach risks overshadowing issues of material inequality and class, rooted in Marxist thought, and hence obscuring the fact that some individuals and groups have more limited capacity for making “lifestyle choices” than others, stemming from the way they are positioned in the social hierarchy.

Veganism, when taken up as a scholarly subject matter, can easily lend itself to the former type of analysis. Indeed, definitions of veganism, including by vegans themselves, typically conceptualize it as “a way of living,” consciously chosen for ethical, health, and/ or environmental reasons. In practice, it is associated primarily with making alternative consumption choices. Studying veganism as a personal identity places emphasis on individual choices (such as choices around consumption), leaving aside power relations, ways in which food choices are always political (Lavin; Jenkins and Twine), and how marginalized social groups are limited in making “lifestyle choices.” To counteract the former tendency, veganism should be studied as a situated collective practice enmeshed with systems and relations of power. A good place to begin this kind of analysis would be to take an intersectional perspective on the vegan movement in Estonia and those who are part of it.

Intersectionality is an analytical framework apt for exploring social differences, identities, and power relations, originating from black feminist thought (see for example Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hill Collins 1990, 1993). This approach emphasizes the intertwined nature of socially constructed categories of identity and difference, such as gender, race, class, age, and others. Intersections of these categories acquire meanings in relation to each other to produce social hierarchies and unique experiences (of privilege and/or disadvantage) for individuals and groups differently positioned in terms of these divisions.<sup>4</sup> The issue of membership of the community, particularly in terms of (invisible) barriers of participation and who gets included and excluded, is one that individuals and groups, as part of the Estonian vegan community (and indeed in many vegan movements elsewhere in the world) rarely critically reflect on. Yet

this is a matter of social justice and has implications for the spread of veganism and its potential to form ties with other social movements.

Some scholarly attention has been paid to questions of privilege and inequalities in relation to animal advocacy and vegan movements, mostly in the North American context. It has been pointed out that these movements primarily consist of privileged individuals in terms of race and class (Harper; Nocella); veganism is an identity category “marked by whiteness” in the US (Wright 31). Also, gender has been examined in this context (see Gaarder). Sexist advertising used by PETA, one of the most visible organizations promoting veganism, goes against feminist commitments (Glasser). These findings suggest that intersectional sensitivities in the vegan movement could well be sharpened.

I have previously looked at membership of the animal advocacy movement in the Baltic countries from an intersectional perspective (Aavik, “The Animal Advocacy Movement”). As important parts of vegan and animal rights communities in Estonia overlap, the same insights largely apply to the Estonian vegan community as well.<sup>5</sup>

Similar to many Western contexts, vegans in Estonia share a familiar demographic profile: they are typically educated, urban, young, white, ethnic-majority women.<sup>6</sup> This has implications for the dominant representations of veganism and vegans. Below, I will briefly consider three categories—gender, class, and ethnicity—and some of their intersections in the context of veganism in Estonia.

In terms of gender, Estonia exhibits some of the largest inequalities in the EU, such as the largest gender pay gap (26.9 percent) (Eurostat 2015) as well as high gender-based employment segregation (Bettio and Verashchagina). While traditional notions of masculinity and femininity are slow to disappear, segments of the younger generation are increasingly challenging traditional ways of doing gender. In recent years, feminist ideas have started to gradually reach mainstream audiences through social media (for example, via the popular feminist blog [Feministeerium.ee](http://Feministeerium.ee)).

Among vegans in Estonia, one finds significantly more vegan women than men, for similar reasons as elsewhere, such as gendered socialization encouraging girls to be more emphatic than boys. Also, as in many other countries, civil society activism is underpaid and undervalued, resulting in a vegan advocacy workforce that is overwhelmingly female.

When examining gender in the context of the Estonian vegan movement, it would be fruitful to pay closer attention to masculinities, the traditionally unmarked dimension of the category of gender. Traditional anti-egalitarian masculinities are still prevalent in Estonia today, even in novel social situations (Pajumets). Veganism could largely be seen as incompatible with notions of hegemonic

masculinity (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt). As in most Western societies, meat eating is an important element in the construction of masculinities (Adams) in Estonia.

Yet as in other cultures, what could be considered “alternative masculinities” are starting to emerge, under which the practices of many vegan men would fall. In this light, it would be interesting to study vegan men to understand how they negotiate vegan masculinity, as it has been already done in Western contexts (see for example Adams; Potts and Parry; Rothgerber; Wright 107–29). Further studies could focus on the following questions, among others. Whether and how does veganism encourage enacting alternative masculinities in Estonia? Whether and how do vegan masculinities disrupt traditional notions of what it means to be a man in Estonia? Whether—and in which ways— do vegan men continue to retain male privilege and benefit from the patriarchal dividend (Connell; Gender 142)? Here it is again crucial to take an intersectional perspective to appreciate how men’s vegan-ism is intertwined with their positioning in terms of ethnicity, class, age, etc., as well as their politics and practices in relation to feminism, nationalism, capitalism, etc. Indeed, going vegan might not necessarily constitute a threat to men’s sense and doing of masculinity. As some examples from Western popular culture demonstrate, vegan men might emphasize some elements of hegemonic masculinity in their everyday practices, such as bodybuilding or drinking (see, for example, Vegan Bros, [veganbodybuilding.com](http://veganbodybuilding.com)).

The gender split in the Estonian vegan movement has implications for establishing romantic and intimate vegan partnerships. Heterosexual vegan women might find it challenging to find a vegan man as a partner. Given this reality, many are faced with a choice of whether to remain single or to enter into a relationship with non-vegan men, which many do. Hence, it becomes important to consider issues around intimate and sexual relationships, including vegansexuality—the preference of some vegans to form sexual and intimate relationships exclusively with other vegans (Potts and Parry 53). How are conflicts around veganism negotiated on a daily basis in relationships where one partner is vegan and the other is not? How are such conflicts gendered in heterosexual relationships? What does this tell us about the functioning of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and the gender order?

Looking at the vegan movement in Estonia in terms of class presents a somewhat complicated picture. The category of class itself is ambiguous in the post-socialist space. The Soviet regime obliterated the class system emerging in Estonia prior to its occupation. Yet while socioeconomic inequalities in post-socialist European societies are rising, they are typically not conceptualized through the notion of class. For example, Estonia is one of the most unequal societies in Europe,<sup>7</sup> yet talking about inequality here is unpopular (Helemäe and Saar). This is partly due to the prevalence of neoliberal logic, which largely dismisses structural inequalities.

In Western societies, vegan identities are typically associated with privileged class positions; however, this does not necessarily apply to Estonia. While some vegans come from relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, many, particularly young students, may grapple with economic insecurity. For example, most key vegan and animal advocacy activists hold full-time jobs elsewhere, which in some cases involves unskilled work. However, I argue that their ability to go vegan and engage in vegan activism is facilitated by their privileged position in terms of other social divisions—they are young, members of an ethnic-majority, educated, internet-savvy, fluent in English, and live predominantly in urban areas. Many less privileged people might not be able to afford to spend extra time and effort to go vegan. This is particularly evident for example with older Russian-speakers in rural areas lacking vegan communities and in places where information and vegan products tend to be difficult to access.

This brings me to the category of ethnicity. Social divisions in Estonia are seen primarily along ethnic, not racial, lines, with ethnicity being a politicized category. Estonia's Russian-speaking community (around 25 percent of the population) remains largely separate from Estonians. Rather meager attempts at integration of the two ethno-linguistic communities by successive governments have largely been unfruitful. Despite optimistic hopes in the public discourse that younger generations, especially with the improved Estonian-language skills of Russian-speaking youth and the generally greater open-mindedness attributed to younger generations, will be able to bridge this divide, this division has proved to be notoriously challenging to navigate.

This ethnic divide manifests itself well in the Estonian vegan community and has not shown much change over recent years. Russian-speaking people are virtually absent from Estonian vegan circles, including from the membership of the Estonian Vegan Society. This includes absence from Estonian-language social media communities focused on veganism. There is a Facebook page and a related Instagram page<sup>8</sup>—both with modest numbers of followers—run by a Russian-speaking vegan activist, in the Russian language, with only very few Estonian followers.

There are several reasons for a lack of Russian-speakers in the Estonian vegan community. They face some similar barriers that affect people of color in many Western countries, such as in the US: marginalization due to a stigmatized racial or ethnic identity position and/or citizenship status constitutes structural obstacles that might make going vegan difficult. For example, nearly 20 percent of Russians in Estonia do not have Estonian citizenship, or indeed the citizenship of any country.<sup>9</sup> The fact that white and ethnic majority groups do not have to deal with the negative consequences of racial or ethnic discrimination and issues related to equal citizenship rights makes it easier for them to consider veganism. Globally, veganism is far more common among the privileged. In part, it is the lack of discrimination that enables people to consider options outside the norm.



Also, reasons include lack of other vegans (as role models) in minority communities and poor availability of vegan food options—for example, Russian-speakers in Estonia are concentrated in Eastern Estonia and in parts of Tallinn and other cities that provide very limited vegan options when eating out.

Barriers of language and access to information are also important. While most young Russians are fluent in Estonian, their parents and grandparents (older generations) are less so. Many receive most of their information through Russian state media. This, exacerbated by spatial segregation in many cases, leaves them in a social vacuum, which prevents them from learning about veganism.

Privileges based on gender, ethnicity, and class that I have discussed here, and their intersections, generally remain invisible to those who enjoy them. Hence there is a need for more critical reflection on the membership of the Estonian vegan movement on the part of its activists and participants. This is not only important for the spread of veganism, but also an issue of social justice. Further studies on vegans and vegan identities in Estonia should therefore take into account the structural positioning of vegans. Other social categories of difference and identity, such as age, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness, and their intersections, should also be considered. Tackling these issues is important empirically, theoretically, methodologically, as well as politically.

## **THE RELATION OF VEGANISM TO THE MAINSTREAM CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS**

Similar to other countries, veganism in Estonia occupies an uneasy position in relation to mainstream culture. From around ten to fifteen years ago, when the phenomenon of veganism gradually started to emerge in the public sphere, its visibility has increased significantly, facilitated by the rise of social media. Today, vegan issues frequently find their way to the mainstream media. However, most coverage in the Estonian media has been of a negative nature, highlighting the dangers of veganism to human health (particularly regarding children) and its nutritional inadequacies. The major coverage of veganism in the Estonian mainstream media in March 2017 could be understood as an episode of nationwide moral panic, which unfolded following the publication of a newspaper article quoting the head of the Estonian Pediatric Association declaring that “veganism forced on small children might be life threatening.”<sup>10</sup> In other instances of more positive coverage, veganism is reduced to a lifestyle project or diet, as when vegan recipes are introduced to readers. As a further project in vegan studies in Estonia, a discourse analysis of media representations of veganism would be crucial.

While veganism is still marginal culturally, it is even more so in terms of its institutional reception, for example its acceptance by hegemonic institutions and bodies of knowledge, particularly by the medical and nutrition establishments. As in other cultures, traditions and social norms around what constitutes “proper

eating” are deeply rooted in Estonia and are enmeshed with academic knowledge production in the discipline of nutrition. One of the biggest challenges that Estonian vegans face today concerns the virtually universal condemnation of veganism by doctors and nutritionists. This is well reflected in the national dietary guidelines, the key document establishing the country’s official discourse on nutrition. My analysis of the latest nutrition guidelines from a vegan perspective (see Aavik, “Nonhuman Animals”) demonstrates that eating animal-based foods is deemed essential by the authors (leading nutrition experts in Estonia) of the guidelines and veganism is declared as unsuitable for human health. Veganism is labeled a “self-restricted diet,” reducing it to a personal choice without any political motives. This language of “restriction” is also problematic for other reasons. For example, it implies that one has to limit what one eats when, more often than not, becoming vegan in fact increases the diversity of one’s diet (for a more extended critique of this language used in the Estonian dietary guide- lines, see Aavik, “Nonhuman Animals”).<sup>11</sup>

The implications and material consequences of these dietary guide- lines for vegans are dire, affecting their lives on a daily basis. Based on the guidelines, public institutions such as schools and hospitals will compile their menus, and medical professionals will advise patients. Vegans will not receive institutional support, but will likely be ostracized. If doctors and nutritionists declare veganism as nutritionally inadequate, it will likely not be taken up by large segments of the population.

Given this state of affairs, becoming and staying vegan in Estonia is a rather disruptive and even risky move, as it means challenging established scientific discourses in nutrition and medicine and the practices following from them. This is no easy task, especially for young vegans such as teenagers, who still depend on their parents, nor for pregnant women and young mothers, who are particularly demonized.

The consumption of animal-based foods is linked to nationalist ideas around proper eating, just as Wright (39) describes the perceived sanctity of “American” food. Nationalist ideas around food are in turn intertwined with the capitalist system of production. There are state-endorsed campaigns to promote local foods and the interests of local Estonian businesses, including, notably, the dairy and meat industries, who continue to receive significant subsidies from the state. Indeed, authors of the new nutrition guide- lines explicitly declare that among the factors taken into account in compiling the guidelines are Estonian large- and small-scale pro- duction, supply, and consumption patterns (Pitsi et al). Evoking elements of the capitalist system of production in this context indicates the intertwined nature of medical and nutritional knowledge and business interests. A leading Estonian nutritionist and member of the team of authors of the national nutrition guidelines is closely associated with and holds several patents in an Estonian venture where scientists and the dairy industry cooperate to create “healthy dairy products,”<sup>12</sup> an obvious conflict of interest that remains

unproblematized by everyone except vegans. Ironically, as the promotion of (especially locally produced) meat and dairy in diet seems to originate from a “neutral position,” one of genuine concern over public health, representing “proper” and “healthy” eating. This is an indication of how culturally normalized meat and dairy are in Estonia.

Given this climate, vegans find themselves with the discursively and materially difficult task of challenging these norms established and upheld by enmeshed hegemonic discourses of nutrition, nationalism, and capitalist interests.

Future research could consider, in detail, the ways in which vegan-ism and vegans are constructed as a threat—such as to traditional eating habits, the nationalist project, gender norms, etc.—in mainstream discourses, and how vegans in fact disrupt these established norms through their everyday practices.

In a culture that marginalizes veganism, it would be crucial for vegans to form strategic alliances and intersectional coalitions (Hancock 119) with other (marginalized) groups in order to support each other and to gain public recognition on particular issues of common interest. A potentially fruitful collaboration in Estonia in this respect could be with feminist groups. While some ecofeminist thinkers have long sought to show how the oppression of women and animals is deeply intertwined (see for example Adams), the relationship between mainstream feminism and veganism has typically been ambivalent, with feminists reluctant to connect these two strands of thinking and activism (Aavik and Kase). Yet some in the emerging generation of feminists in Estonia take an intersectional perspective, which includes attention to animal lives. Vegans and feminists could engage in collaborative dismantling of nationalist, speciesist, and patriarchal discourses, which enforce traditional gender norms linked to food practices. For example, it would be in the interests of both vegans and feminists to challenge the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, which is partly constructed around eating animals. This might also help to encourage the emergence of more egalitarian masculinities.

## **VEGANISM, CAPITALISM, AND CONSUMPTION**

Finally, I will critically examine the relationship of vegan identities and practices in Estonia to capitalism and consumption, which I already alluded to in relation to the national dietary guidelines in the previous section. While for many in the Estonian vegan community ethical considerations were central in going vegan, collective identity building typically revolves around food, eating, as well as health issues, all ultimately linked to consumption practices, as evidenced by discussions in the main Estonian vegan online communities. The most popular Estonian vegan Facebook page, titled “Yes, it’s vegan!,” focuses exclusively on sharing images of food, recipes, and information on the availability of vegan products in Estonian grocery stores. Openly critical attitudes toward capitalism appear to be scarce among most vegans, although, among the diverging vegan

community, one of the small subgroups includes anarchist animal-rights advocates and vegans, who approach oppressions as interlinked.

The annual key vegan event, the Estonian Vegan Fair, organized by the Estonian Vegan Society, and held for six consecutive years, focuses on the sales of vegan products and has been extremely popular. This event, while instrumental in introducing veganism to the Estonian mainstream public, is nonetheless focused almost exclusively on consumption, albeit vegan consumption. Based on major public events such as the Fair, veganism has acquired a particular image in popular imagination, one associated primarily with food and the consumption of certain products. An important question for subsequent research would be how vegan groups represent veganism and what their considerations are behind choosing these particular representations. As is typical with vegan groups elsewhere in the world, the Estonian Vegan Society tends to choose language and messaging that is rather mild, emphasizing the individual (consumption) choices of people, not politicizing food choices in their public communication and not associating them with animal rights discourses. It is widely believed that doing so would scare people away. The latest Vegan Fair was advertised with images of conspicuous health and socializing over appetizing food. Attractive, young, and fit ethnic Estonians were shown at the gym and later sharing a meal (Estonian Vegan Society, online video clip). The orientation of the ad was clearly toward presenting a certain desirable lifestyle. How does this representation speak to people who do not identify themselves with such images? Will it in their minds consolidate veganism as an unattainable endeavor, reserved for the relatively privileged?

Given the scarcity of funding sources for civil society organizations in Estonia, the Vegan Society has been considering a range of funding streams. One of these includes corporate sponsorship. Indeed, regular donations from private donors, mostly companies, are seen by the Society as the primary viable funding option. Entering into such partnerships poses a variety of ethical questions that need to be negotiated. This is a concern that NGOs face the world over.

There is a danger that as long as vegans and the vegan movement retain a largely uncritical relationship to capitalist relations of production, they are complicit in reproducing a variety of inequalities and forms of exploitation. While it is encouraging to see many vegans increasingly paying attention to the use of palm oil in some vegan-labeled products, and many preferring fair-trade products, veganism through “ethical consumerism” is unlikely to provide the societal transformation we might be looking for.

Future research needs to critically consider the entanglement of vegan identities and practices embedded within capitalism, including its relationship with what has been termed as “ethical capitalism” (Barry 195) or “humane economy” (Pacelle 248). As vegans, thinking of ourselves as “ethical consumers,” capable of changing exploitative relations of production, is often misleading (see

Gunderson, and Littleton for a critique), and it gives us a false sense of accomplishment each time we buy vegan products. Profound structural inequalities of capitalism remain unaddressed (Littleton). In Estonia, as elsewhere, it is important to consider how capitalism is intertwined and supported by nationalism. Indeed, the Estonian Internal Security Service lists “extremist ideologies” as threats to the nation on its website. In the list of “left-wing extremism,” it identifies anti-capitalism as one of the threats.<sup>13</sup>

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This chapter has discussed the potential for the emergence of vegan studies in post-socialist contexts, focusing on the case of Estonia, where veganism is a new and emergent social and cultural phenomenon that has thus far received no scholarly attention. I have examined various factors that shape veganism in Estonia and proposed some directions in which vegan identities and practices could be studied in subsequent research, both in terms of subject matter as well as methodologically.

I have argued that studying veganism primarily as a personal identity and lifestyle choice produces a limited and myopic understanding of veganism, sidelining its political dimensions and the ways it is enmeshed with various systems of power. I advocate for an intersectional approach, which I propose to use in the case of the thematic areas and issues around veganism that I outlined here: the membership of the vegan movement and who is left out based on their structural positioning in the social hierarchy, the relationship of veganism to mainstream culture and its potential to form alliances with other movements, and finally, its relationship to capitalism and consumption. In developing vegan studies, conceptual frameworks could be adopted from ecofeminism and the emergent discipline of critical animal studies (see for example Taylor and Twine), in part inspired by ecofeminist ideas, which embrace intersectionality.

In terms of the uniqueness of veganism and vegan studies in the post-socialist and particularly the Estonian context, there are similarities as well as important differences with the development and manifestations of veganism in Western countries. Despite the short time that Estonia has lived under democracy and capitalism, veganism here exhibits similar tendencies as in many Western countries, such as orientation to consumerism. Indeed, after the collapse of the communist system, market economy and neoliberal policies were considered by governments as well as by citizens as the only legitimate ways forward. Serious opposition to capitalism is particularly slow to emerge in post-socialist nations. While the Estonian vegan movement is difficult to access for particular social groups, with similarity to race- and class-based barriers in the US context, some unique elements stand out, such as a different relationship to the category of class. Another particularity concerns the relationship of veganism to the local nutrition and health establishment. While in most Western European and North

American contexts, mainstream nutrition discourses do not necessarily endorse veganism, in Estonia, this relationship is downright hostile.

This mapping exercise has highlighted some of the more unique aspects of veganism in post-socialist Europe and in Estonia in particular. The insights I provided will hopefully set the ground for the emergence of vegan studies in this region.

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## END NOTES

1. There is no official statistical data on the proportion of vegans and vegetarians among the Estonian population. The rise in the numbers of vegans and interest in veganism is evidenced for example by the growing numbers of members in Estonian-language Facebook groups dedicated to veganism. For instance, at the end of 2015, the groups titled Yes, it's vegan! and Estonian Vegans had 7,000 and 3,500 members, respectively. As of May 2018, Yes, it's vegan! had over 22,000 members and Estonian Vegans nearly 8,500 members. Google Trends shows a steady increase in the search term "vegan" in Estonia over the last five years.
2. Estonians are highly proficient in English. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (Education First 2015), Estonia ranks seventh in English proficiency among seventy countries where English is a non-native language.
3. See Reger, Myers, and Einwohner on identity work within social movements.
4. There has been considerable resistance in mainstream feminism to the inclusion of animals in intersectionality. For more on this, see for example Twine.
5. The insights I present in the rest of this section are based on an article I published at [Animalliberationcurrents.com](http://Animalliberationcurrents.com); see Aavik, "The Animal Advocacy Movement."



6. Due to lack of statistical data on the numbers of vegans in Estonia and their gender ratio, I rely here on personal experiences, observations, and data from social media. In the Facebook group Estonian Vegans, the ratio of men to women is roughly one to four.
7. Estonia's GINI index was 34.8 in 2015 (Eurostat 2017)—only 5 other countries in the EU (in total, 28 countries) display larger income inequality; the gender pay gap in Estonia is 26.9 percent—the largest in the EU (Eurostat 2015).
8. VeganBoom.ee, [facebook.com/veganboom](https://facebook.com/veganboom), [instagram.com/vegan\\_boom/](https://instagram.com/vegan_boom/)
9. This large number of stateless persons in Estonia is due to the fact that, after regaining independence in 1991, Estonia did not grant automatic citizenship to Russian-speakers who migrated to Estonia in the Soviet era or to their descendants.
10. Oja, Triin. "Dr Ülle Einberg: pealesurutud veganlus võib väikelastele olla eluohtlik." Pealinn, March 23, 2017, <http://www.pealinn.ee/tagid/koik/dr-ulle-einberg-pealesurutud-veganlus-voib-vaikelastele-olla-n189362>.
11. For a discussion on the language of restriction in relation to vegan eating and identities in the US, please see Wright 89–106.
12. Bio-Competence Centre of Healthy Dairy Products <http://tptak.ee/en>.
13. See [www.kapo.ee/et/content/äärmuslusest-üldisemalt.html](http://www.kapo.ee/et/content/äärmuslusest-üldisemalt.html).